

INDIAN TERRACOTTA

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H A N D I C R A F T S

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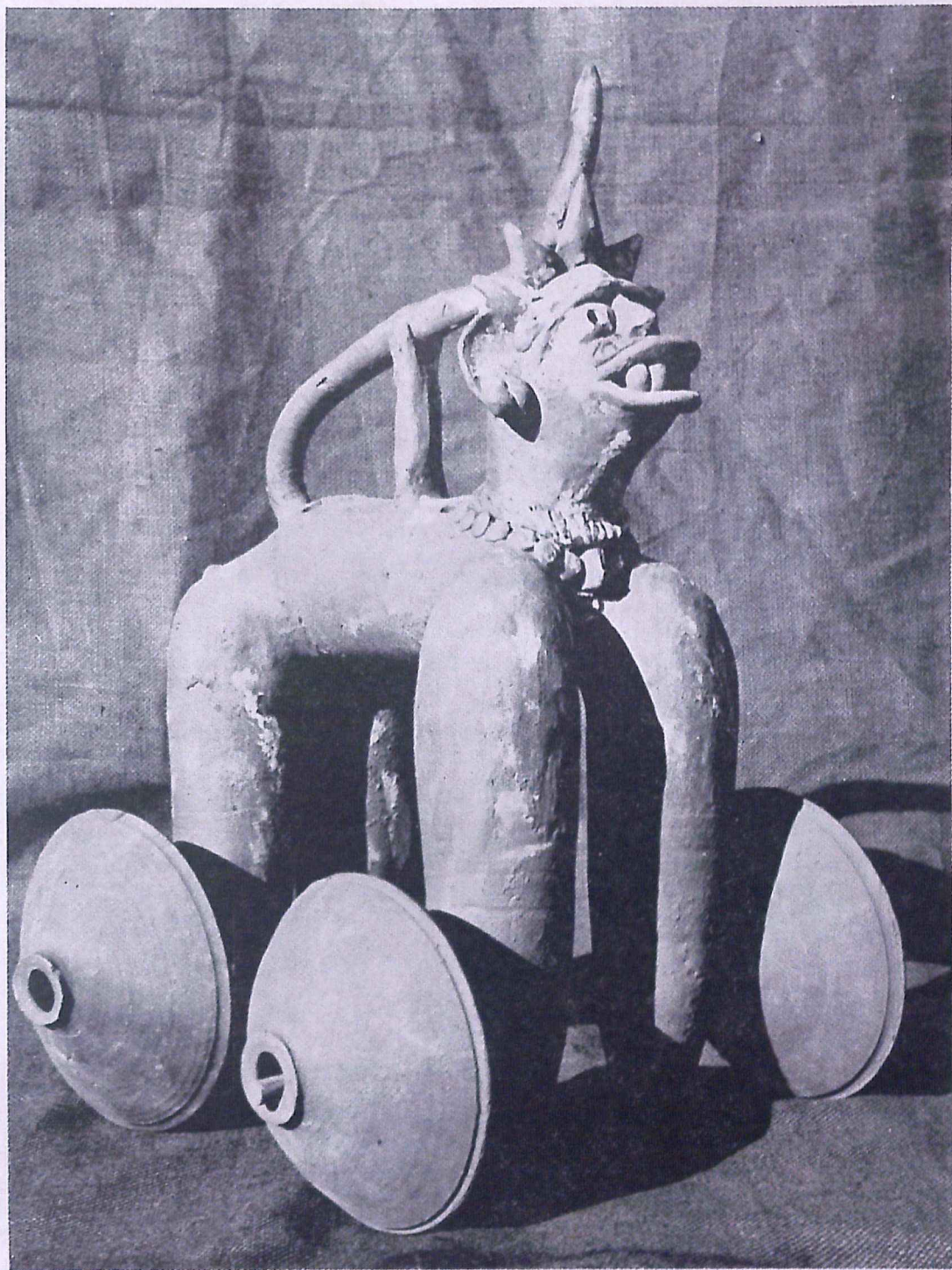


Ganesha, Crafts Museum,
New Delhi

INDIAN TERRACOTTA



**ALL INDIA
HANDICRAFTS BOARD**
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
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Indian Terracotta

Terracotta or clay craft symbolises man's first craftsmanship. Civilizations are now dated and assessed by the degree of skill and beauty displayed by the earthenware found in excavations. It may be that the potter's wheel was the first 'machine' man invented to use the power of motion for a productive purpose. Pottery has been called the lyric of handicrafts because of its universal appeal. But it is the association of religion with this very humble object that has given it a deeper significance. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy has called this clay craft 'documents of the religious culture and of the history of art'. Kalidasa talks of a prince playing with a clay toy; Bana tells us that emperor Harsha employed artists to make a variety of terracottas.

Any casual visitor to an Indian village invariably finds a hoard of terracotta animal figures lying under *pipal* trees or at rural shrines. Abstract in form and varying in sizes, these figures stand for the longings and aspirations of the village folk who still retain the age-old mystic belief which guided the life of the people more than five thousand years ago. The tradition has continued unbroken whether in the clarity of design or in the characteristic plastic values of the shapes. Mother-goddess or the so-called fertility symbols still produced in Assam, West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa resemble the ones worshipped in Mohenjodaro and Harappa. The children of the pre-historic period were amused with the same toys which even today fascinate the children of rural India.

The varied pantheon of *Grama devata*, literally meaning village deity, stem from the primordial goddess of fertility common to all humanity the world over. Each region in India has one or two famous *devatas* like the 'serpent deity', 'Manasha' of Bengal, 'Thakurani' of Orissa, 'Aiyandar', 'Karappan' and 'Muttaiyan' of the South. Votive offerings consisting of clay animals with intriguing symbolism are a substitute for sacrifices offered either in fulfilment of a vow, or to ward off diseases or for ob-

taining a favour. If a couple asks for a son a large horse with a rider is offered but in case a daughter is desired, it is a riderless small horse. A slight change in designs or ornamentation changes the symbolic significance of the item offered.

HERITAGE

Distribution of terracotta over the millenia covers the entire country. While Mohenjodaro type items have been unearthed from Lethal, Rupar and Rangpur, terracotta belonging to Sunga and Kushan periods have been found in Kausambi, Bhita and Rajghat in Uttar Pradesh, Tamluk and Chandra-ketugarh in West Bengal, Rupar in Haryana, Kumrahar and Sonapur in Bihar, Navasa and Prakash in Maharashtra, Purana Qila in New Delhi and Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh. Closely following the parallel contemporary plastic art in stone, terracotta became extremely popular during the Gupta period and is found all over the country. From the Gupta period onwards these were used for architectural decoration also and activities in this direction increased to a very great extent during the mediaeval period. Isolated decorative pieces and terracotta tiles ornated the exterior of the temples which is best exemplified by the Bankura-Vishnupur

group of temples of West Bengal. This wide distribution with unbroken continuity prove the popularity of terracotta to the rural folk in their ceaseless search for forms driven by the inner urge.

TECHNIQUE THROUGH THE AGES

Ageless variety of terracotta, which are still modelled in rural India are being done in the same process which had its beginnings in the remotest past. These are entirely made by hand by means of such rough and steady devices as flattening and rounding the body, pinching up and pressing down the soft clay according to the requirements of the form and drawing the ends of the limbs into conical points. The only technique is the simple pressure of fingers. Eyes, lips, ears, navels, etc. were indicated either by mere scratches or incisions or by fixing strips and pellets—the applique techniques.

In the earliest phase of the 'time-bound' variety the form was reduced to a simple description of the main volumes corresponding to the principal parts of the body. The figurines were modelled entirely by hand by pinching up and pressing down the clay. Special features like eyes, breasts, navel, hair, ornaments, etc. were fashioned by separate pellets or

strips of clay and applied to the modelled form. Firing was all along considered very important on which depended the colour coating. After firing, the figurines, as a rule, were covered with a red wash light and deep—and some-times with a deep polished red which stood the ravages of weather remarkably.

The later phase, that is the Maurya and post Maurya period, witnessed a combination of two processes—hand-modelled and moulded. But for the faces which were pressed from the moulds, the figurines were modelled by hand and applique technique was employed for delineating ornaments and head-dresses. This technique with but slight changes continue even today. Potters wheel play a dominant role. Different parts of the body of the figures are modelled separately on potter's wheel which are then joined together to complete the form. Craftsmen of Darbhanga (Bihar) still practise the combined technique of modelling and moulding. Head, legs, neck, body of the horse, body of the rider are all separately shaped on wheel and then joined to one another as per requirement. After joining the separate pieces and completing the shape it is left for sun-drying which is followed by fire baking. Then black, red, yellow, green and blue colours are

painted as per design on the white coating of the object.

In the preparation of toys in mould-process, well-kneaded lump of clay is placed on a wooden plank and flattened into a sheet by beating it with a dabber. The sheet, cut into size, is then pressed against the inner wall of the mould. The mould is of two pieces. After the inner wall of both the pieces of the mould are covered with clay, side margins are also covered and moistened. Then follows the process of pressing the pieces against each other and keeping these in upright position till the clay layers on side margins stick to each other. Mould is then removed for sun-drying and baking in fire. This is followed by colouring depending on the craftsman's visualisation.

MODERN TREND

Though the 'age-less' variety connected with rituals and associated with mystico-economic belief basically remain unchanged in shape and form, orientation in designing the 'time-bound' type is clear even to a casual observer. To suit the taste of modern generation, a trend of commercialising the craft has laid its impress. Even copies of contemporary stone sculpture and ceramics are none

TAMIL NADU

Horse with Little Ornamentation



Madurai Veeran (Idol of a Hero)



WEST BENGAL

Ganesh Janani from Rajnagar



'Bonga' Tribal idol Mask





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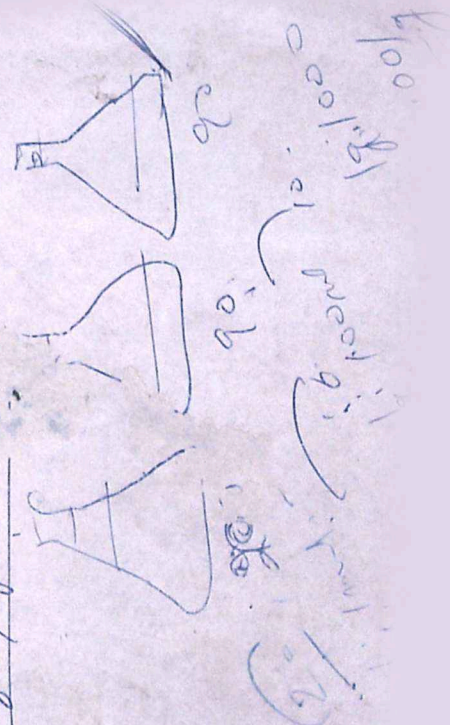
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